

Central Drive

When There is No Just in Justice

A Novel by Regina Neequaye

Chapter 1

It was two gunshots; the seconds in between them felt like hours. The acoustics, so precise, the vibration resonated inside the hollow of my chest. I stand still holding my breath for what seems like an eternity waiting for a barrage of return firepower. The silence makes me uneasy. I move away from the windows to the small space under the stairs where the air is thick and musty. I am anxious and fast becoming claustrophobic. I exhale, as faint sounds of the police and county rescue sirens becomes distinct.

The sound of gunfire in the neighborhood is a common occurrence that blends with television, music, and everyday conversations. This was once a vibrant and safe community. Greed and shady political deals changed the demographics from a neighborhood with a healthy mixture of middle-class, upper-class, and generationally wealthy, stable households to one with a disproportionate number of income challenged minorities and first generation immigrants.

The wealthy households packed up and immediately left the neighborhood at the first sign of the change. Mexican and Blacks gangs moved in and destroyed what was left of our community playing wild, wild, west games at the ending of a crack cocaine epidemic and the onset of the opiate pandemic. One week, a rival black gang attacks a Mexican gang; the next week the Mexican gang retaliates. The violence they bring to the community pushed most of the remaining middle and upper-class households out. With help from the East Europeans immigrants, the gangs have gradually advanced their munitions from nine millimeters to high-power assault weaponry. The East Europeans, relatively new to the community, hide their illegal arms trade, and God only knows what else, behind legitimate businesses.

I lean towards the opening under the stairs and listen for more gunfire. After a few minutes of silence, I move from underneath the stairs and stand in the foyer outside of the kitchen. This does not sound like a typical gang shooting. There is no barrage of bullets followed by tires screeching against the asphalt as the cowards flee the scene.

I used to think about packing my belongings and leaving, but my retirement income is not enough to afford market rent and basic necessities. My home is paid for, and I am on a fixed income. I have no other choice but to stay. The change in the neighborhood is heartbreaking. The schools used to be award winning. The neighborhood was stable, and home values steadily increased. The 1996 World Games our neighboring city hosted exacerbated an already declining community. People came from all over to enjoy the games and festivities. Many fell in love with the cleanliness, affordability of Atlanta and the surrounding suburbs and did not leave. Some relocated from crime ridden cities with the hope of a better life for their families, but neglected to convey their hopes to their offspring who transported the negative behaviors they were fleeing.

The migration created a thriving real estate market never seen before on this side of the Mason Dixon line. The housing market was so lucrative it became a catalyst for a nefarious plot between local politicians in the pockets of rich developers. Housing could not be built fast enough to supply the demand. Developers bulldozed parking lots, dilapidated buildings used by the homeless, and old homes in neighborhoods the police would not enter to build luxury living communities to accommodate the new transplants. To Southerners, these new luxury homes were pricey, but for Northerners, who are accustomed to paying exorbitant rent and mortgages, the prices were a steal. Cranes could be found on almost every corner in downtown Atlanta. New construction sites became part of the landscape, but land is finite. Developers eventually began to run out of space. They looked deeper inside the inner city for land, but commercial land was too expensive to meet their profit margins. Prime real estate sitting under public housing became the

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profitable alternative.

I step into the kitchen, grab a cup from the cabinet, fill it with water, and hold as much water as I can in my mouth. I remove an onion from the bag and begin to peel away the skin. According to my mother, if you hold water in your mouth while cutting onions, it decreases the amount of irritation to the eyes. Just as I was beginning to relax and cut the onion, I hear more sirens and sounds of speeding police cars cutting through the wind.

I distract myself from the uneasiness as more sirens arrive by reminiscing on the old days when one could safely walk the streets in our neighborhood any time of the day or night. The few of us original residents, who still called Central Drive home, could have never imagined this could happen to our neighborhood. We saw it happen in Klaxton, a neighbor county, but did not imagine it would happen to us. As crime increased, Klaxton County schools declined, and the housing values plummeted. Law enforcement decimated the county budget due to overtime paid in a futile attempt to deal with the increasing crime. We erroneously assumed our elected officials would see the disastrous results of our neighbor and take heed, but they did not.

The onion is strong; the water I hold in my mouth does nothing to ease irritation to my eyes. I wipe tears away from my eyes, open the fridge, and remove a slightly frozen chicken for tonight's dinner. Water splashes in my eye, as I drop the chicken in the sink to thaw. I reach for a napkin and notice someone standing outside through a crack in the blinds. I separate the blinds and see Jermaine standing in the middle of the street with a brown paper bag in one hand and a cell phone in the other. A news van, with red and yellow writing, speeds pass on route to join the other responders at the corner; this is unusual. Crime in our neighborhood is so common it is no longer newsworthy.

I peep through the crack in the blinds again. Jermaine has not moved. His head is bent forward; his eyes are glued to his cell phone. He is so still he looks like a mannequin. I close the

blinds and assemble herbs and spices on the counter to season the chicken when it thaws then turn on the television. I am surprised and almost shocked to find “*Breaking news: Officer involved shooting*” pan across the breakfast bar in red, bold letters at the bottom of the television screen.

Chapter 2

“Benazir,” His tone is relaxed and perfectly rehearsed. “Dear, I will have the bank deposit ready in a few.” He is intentionally cautious with his words. His attempt at kindness is awkward and inauthentic. It feels as if I am engaging with a creepy, sociopathic stranger. I would rather he be himself. Over the years, I have grown comfortable with his cruelty.

My father and I are always at odds. He does not understand me, and I no longer care to understand him. My mother is all I have. My mother is educated and highly accomplished in her field. She is a professor at one of the major universities in Atlanta. She is respected amongst her peers and sits on many corporate and civic boards. She is well-read and very cultured. The Brute only reads numbers on American currency. I don't understand my mother's reasons for marrying such a backwards man. “*Duty and Tradition,*” are the words she sings when I ask her to expound on the tragedy I call her life. After she sings “*Duty and Tradition,*” I tune out everything that comes out of her mouth. She has the power. She is a citizen. The Brute is not. She could rid herself of him with the swipe of a pen but for this “*Duty and Tradition.*” His ways are archaic. He is the most self-centered person I have ever met; he believes he is entitled because he is a man. My parents have nothing in common. I am the only good thing that came from their tragic union.

I detest living in the same house with him. He is so toxic that simply looking at him causes me to spiral into a deep depression. My parents spent thousands of dollars on mandated counseling to reveal what I have always known. My father is mentally ill, and he makes the entire family sick.

His assaults on me and my mother started as far back as I can remember. He suffers from a deeply rooted self-hate that afflicts many members of minority cultures living in a Eurocentric society. He unsuccessfully tried to pass the self-hate gene to me. He would often compare me with thin, Caucasian girls. He was especially fond of those with blonde hair and blue eyes.

He pushed me to befriend unwelcoming Caucasian classmates. He did not understand the cruelty inflicted on a brown skin girl trying to fit in with white skin and blue-eyed privilege. Befriending people of color felt natural, but Black Americans are the lowest on the totem pole in his opinion. *"They are lazy and uncultured,"* he would say. The fact that ninety percent of his business is with Black Americans does not change his opinion. He also has disdain for Mexicans, but they are slightly higher on his totem pole; he proclaims, *"Mexicans are drunks but hard workers."* White Americans are the only group he gives a pass. He shows more kindness to the white drug addicts who come into the store begging for handouts than he does to the hard-working Black Americans that patronize his business. Blacks are not be accepted by either of my parents. Pakistanis are too traditional for my liking, so I was forced to navigate towards Caucasian classmates. In order to be more than a tag along, I starved myself to have the thin, boyish body white boys seem to find attractive. I bleached my hair so much it fell out forcing me to cut it much shorter than comfortable.

Most of the popular Caucasian kids ignored me. To keep from being alone and totally isolated, I settled for the misfits. Rachel was my misfit Caucasian friend. She was smart and ranked in the top three percent of our class, but she suffered from eating disorders and controlled her weight by purging. I made the tragic mistake of bringing her home for a weekend sleepover. The Brute was so captivated with her she became the new model for my behavior. "Benazir," He would say, "You must exercise harder! Look at your beautiful mother. She has perfect face but look at her ass." He would turn his nose upward and do quick side to side movements with his

head that is normally associated with Indians. “Do you want to be a blubber ass like your mother?” He has no regards for my mother. He is comfortable and holds nothing back in expressing his disdain for the native attributes of the woman he married.

“Look at your friend Rachel; she is a tiny little thing.” His bright smile and jovial expression as he speaks of Rachel feels creepy. “you should exercise with her.” Rachel does not exercise. She purges. She eats more food in one sitting than I ever thought humanly possible. Watching her eat is an event. She closes her eyes and slowly chews her food savoring every morsel. If a grain falls out of her mouth, onto her clothing, the table or even the floor, she quickly picks it up, blows it off and puts it back into her mouth. She sits still all of ten minutes after consuming a meal a man four times her size could not ingest, excuses herself to the bathroom, and purges.

I grew tired of the rigorous exercise routine. I was tired of starving myself. I missed the comfort of a full stomach and the taste of food, so I enlisted Rachel for purging lessons. Her regimen was strict. Rule number one, eat as much as you can in ten minutes and move the food all over your tongue to savor the flavor. Rule number two, eat most meals alone and rule three, and the most important, place the index finger in the back of the throat before the food begins to digest, so most of what is ingested comes back up through the mouth. After I mastered the art of purging; my friendship with Rachel quickly began to run its course. Her obsession with her looks became annoying.

By tenth grade, the Brute’s constant nagging began to take a serious toll. I was never thin enough. My hair was too fluffy. I ate too much bread. I should work on my abs. I began to eat less and purge more. The purging began to cause health problems; the acid from my stomach began to damage my esophagus. No matter how much I purged, I could not get thin enough. I began using laxatives in addition to purging to control my weight. I was always hungry. I would go days surviving on lettuce and water or cucumbers soaked in lemon juice.

My body was not getting enough nutrients for basic functioning; I began to pass out in school. The teachers became concerned about my emaciated look. The school counselor called the house to express the staff's belief I should be evaluated for an eating disorder. His response was, "When she gets hungry, she will eat. Paying tens of thousands of dollars for someone to tell a child to eat is crazy." The counselor was persistent and expressed to the Brute her belief that my health and possibly my life was in danger. He is self-righteous. He had no regards for the teachers or counselors. When they called the house, he would pick up the phone after the first ring, wait for a couple of seconds, and slam the handset hard against the cradle. The school counselor became irritated with his response and sent a letter delivered by the Sheriff Deputy that outlined a series of consequences if he continued to refuse to address their concerns. Believing law enforcement interaction could affect his application for citizenship, he reluctantly agreed to meet with the school nurse and counselor. He remained resistant. He yelled at me and my mother in front of the counselor and other staff members while constantly proclaiming, "*This would never happen in Pakistan*"

After two meetings with the counselor, he decided he was done. In response, the counselor forwarded our case to the Department of Child Services. A middle aged black woman escorted by the police appeared at our front door and threatened to take me away. I am not certain he was serious, but his response to the Children's Services Worker was, "*Take her!*" My mother became hysterical, borrowed a backbone, and finally threatened to take me and leave. This was the one and only time I ever witnessed her exercise the power we all know she has.

The Department of Child Services opened a case and the courts mandated our family to counseling. The counselor barely spoke to my father. She would start each session asking, "*Does everyone feel safe?*" She would look at my mother intensely. My mother never answered; she locked eyes with the Brute and simply turned away. I ignore the Brute's subtle, menacing looks when the

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counselor addressed me and asked if I felt safe. I would respond, “*I don’t know.*” The counselor advised that I keep a log when I do not feel safe and include the names of the people who made me feel unsafe. Initially, the Brute’s verbal attacks became harsher and more frequent. However, he quickly changed his disposition, as it became apparent as I walked around with my notepad, I was taking notes and logging every time he was verbally abusive to me or my mother.

Though the counselor did everything within her power to remain bias, it was evident she knew what I have always known; my father is a monster and the source of our family problems. The counselor addressed my log of unsafe feelings in the presence of me, my mother, and the Brute during the weekly sessions. He denied each and every incident of his abusive actions, past and present. He denied the year he tormented me with exercise I did not want to partake in. He denied referring to me and my mother as “*Blubber ass.*” My mother’s loyalty to “*Duty and Tradition*” outweighs her maternal obligations; she co-signed his denial of abuse. It was obvious the counselor did not believe my parents. Finding solidarity with the counselor changed my disposition. I no longer participated in his exercise routines. I stopped purging, and my weight began to stabilize. My prognosis was good. After several months, the counselor ended the sessions with the caveat to call if the Brute’s behavior began to deteriorate.

I began to befriend black girls in my classes because we had more in common. He often accuses me of behaving too much like Black Americans. My style of clothing and in his opinion less than stellar grades are worrisome. In high school, I sometimes barely made the “*A*” always 91, 92 or 93 much too many points from 100. I am now a sophomore in college and still a straight “*A*” student,

He holds strong to his belief that I am unaware of the amazing blessings he bestows on me. He continued on occasions with threats to send me to Pakistan. I used to have bouts of anxiety thinking he would send me away. I would check their credit card statements every month to see if

he purchased plane tickets to have adequate time to plan my escape. I developed a habit of saving money in various places in my room in the event I have to leave at a moment's notice.

The Brute is not only emotionally abusive, he is a financial abuser. He questions my mother about every penny she spends from her pay. He nags her and demands she direct deposits her pay into their joint account. He made himself the financial officer of the family because my brilliant mother with the PhD is not smart enough to manage money she earns. I work six-hour days, seven days per week, and my pay is two hundred dollars per week. When I complain my pay is less than minimum wage, he sends invoices demanding immediate payment for rent to live in the house my mother purchased and for the car note he pays out of their joint account where the only deposits are from my mother's earnings.

We fare better than many. We call an eight-bedroom, ten bath house in an exclusive gated community home. My father and I work on the corner of Harrison Road and Central Drive in one of four convenience stores he owns. He has all the money he could ever need, yet it is not enough.

Initially, I did not want to work for him. I dreaded it and even threatened suicide. I ran away to my Aunt's only to return because I felt sorry for my mother. I did not want her to have to bare his cruelty alone. He used to have workers from Pakistan he trusted to work in the stores. Unfortunately, like him, most had expired education VISAs. After September 11, 2001, the government began to crack down on all illegal residents and passed stricter laws that required businesses to verify the legality of their workers. Thus, it became hard to hire undocumented workers. Many people look at our dark skin and hair texture and believe us to be Mexican, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement stings that target Mexicans and Central American immigrants prompted most of his trusted, but undocumented, Pakistani employees to flee to Canada out of fear of deportation.

I detest being in his presence, but working for him at the Central Drive store became the best

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things that ever happened to me “*She is no longer depressed, and she smiles all of the time,*” he brags to my mother. He credits my new attitude to bonding and spending time with him. Nothing could be further from the truth. I met my best friend, the love of my life, while working at his store. His name is Jean Jacques, but I call him Panther.

I would never tell my father about Panther. I often think of sharing my relationship with Panther with my mother but I know “*Duty and Tradition*” owns her loyalty and takes precedence over mother, daughter secrets. I love my Panther. He helped me heal from years of torment under the Ali Jinnah, also known as the Brute, Regime. Unlike the Brute, Panther is strong yet compassionate and unlike my mother he is free and not bound by “*Duty and Tradition.*” Panther is a highly ranked amateur boxer dedicated to his craft. My love for him grew exponentially the first time I saw him in the boxing ring. It was as if he transformed into a God right before me eyes.

“I don’t think I can go.” He invited me to his boxing match against Caesar, the Magnificent, an undefeated Mexican boxer in the amateur circuit. Caesar’s stats were high; it seems everyone in the neighborhood including the Brute placed bets with the Russian restaurant owner against Panther. “I will ask permission, but I doubt he will allow me to go to a boxing match.” We were at Kenwood Park, a secluded park in the middle of a subdivision down the street from the store. We carved out every moment we could to spend together. A quick kiss on the side of the store when I take the trash to the dumpster or a meetup for heavy petting and passionate kissing during a lunch break were moments I lived for.

“You are an adult. Right? I want to look out in the crowd and see your beautiful face. Everyone is betting against me. I need a good luck charm.” His smile is bright; a tingling sensation runs through my body as he licks his thick lips, steps closer, and plants light kisses on my forehead. Perspiration glistened like diamonds as the sunlight reflected against his dark, chocolate skin. He stood tall like Goliath next to my five feet, four-inch frame.

“I don’t know if I can.” Though I am in college, I never saw myself as an adult. I have always seen myself as their child.

“Just come.” He passes the ticket. I surprise myself and take it.

The day of the boxing match I went crazy thinking of excuses to leave the store. “*You are an adult*” plays through my mind all day. Finally, I grabbed my purse and said, “*I am leaving for the day.*” He stands in the front of the register counting money. I did not give the words time to sink in. I grabbed my jacket, left the store, got in my car, and quickly sped out of the parking lot before the words could register in his brain. Instead of going home, I parked at the burger joint down the street, went into the bathroom, and changed clothes.

The parking lot at the Alliance Auditorium was full. Flashing lights from a sea of cameras illuminate the sky like a New Year’s Day celebration, as photographers snap pictures of local and national celebrities stepping out of top of the line, luxury cars. Professional scouts looking for the next contender occupy the first two rows of seats in the auditorium. The venue was standing room only. The noise was exhilarating. Women, some dressed in clothing so revealing they cannot wear underwear, scream to the top of their lungs as Panther jogged down the aisle of the small arena behind his stepfather and trainers. The Caucasian man the neighborhood named White Junkie Boy cleans up well. I almost did not recognize him, as he took his seat in the VIP section.

The Panther throws his robe off his shoulder, jumps over the boxing ropes from a standing position, and aggressively steps to Caesar, the Magnificent. The referee raises his hand and slightly pushes the Panther away from his opponent. His chest looks like a rising mountain as he inhales. The darkness of his skin, the deep cuts in his arms, and the hard, curved mounds on his chest mesmerized me. His gentle nature instantly transforms into a Herculean God. It appears as if his body lengthens an entire foot. His eyes are blank. His normal jovial affect is flat. The referee stands in the middle of the ring and explains the rules. There is no sign Panther is in tune with his

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words. He stares straight into his opponent's eyes until the bell rings. Panther takes two quick steps to Caesar and throws a series of quick punches. The sound of his fist hitting his opponent's face echoes over the noise of the cheering crowd.

I quickly turn my face and close my eyes when Caesar makes contact with Panther's perfect, chiseled face. The impact is hard. Panther stumbles backwards. His head appears to turn three hundred and sixty degrees. I open my eyes and notice the Russian restaurant owner across the street from our store and the Korean store owner sitting in the second row. They all jumped to their feet when Panther dodges Caesar's right fist by a hair and lands two quick left jabs to the side of Caesar's face then a quick right hand jab to the middle of his forehead. Caesar, the magnificent, hits the canvas hard. His body stiffens like a wooden board. Panther shows no mercy. He pounds his fist together and circles the opponent as he lay flat on the canvas. The referee pushes Panther in the corner; he paces back and forth. Caesar rolls over, grabs one of the ropes, and tries to prop himself on his knees only to fall forward. The referee begins the count. He yells, "ten," Caesar lies still on the canvas; his coach runs to him, removes something from his pocket, and places it in front of Caesar's nose. He slowly sits up but cannot stand. Panther leaves the corner with both gloved fist in the air. He stands on the second rope, receives his accolades from the cheering crowd, then walks to Caesar, reaches down, pulls him to his feet, and embraces him.

I am in love. I would love to share my happiness with my mother; she most likely will not keep secrets from the Brute. I would never risk Panther's life. My father is in denial; he is a racist. He can be angry and almost violent when the black boys attempt to engage me in conversation when they come in the store. He has no worries. I do not like the demeanor of the boys who come in the store with their pants down showing their underwear. They do not have Panther's discipline. I also run them out of the store. Some are so bold I have to threaten them with the gun we keep behind the counter. But the Panther is different. He is not like the other black boys or the

Pakistani boys who speak to my father regarding his plans for my life. “Benazir.” His tone is soft; it sounds as if he is whispering.

“Yes.”

“I have the bank deposit ready.” He passes the deposit bag. “You must hurry and get to the bank. We need more singles. Ask the teller for quarters; we are running low.” I place the money bag in my book bag and walk towards the door. I unlock my phone and dial Panther. He does not answer. His voicemail picks up the call. “Don’t go the back way through the *Nigger jungle*.” He warns, as I push the door open.

“You sound like the racist whites who always confuse us with Mexicans and terrorists.”

“I am many things but I am not racist Benazir.” He points his finger towards me and shakes his head side to side. I ignore him, remove the phone from my pocket, and dial Panther’s number again. He does not answer. “don’t you see I gave that retarded black boy a job cutting the grass and cleaning the grounds?” I ignore him as his chest extends outward with pride; if he were truthful, he would acknowledge the “*retarded black boy*” was desperate and the only person who would take the job as the wages were below the minimum, and the Brute pays him cash. No one knows anything about his retarded worker other than his name. He is a mysterious member of the neighborhood that goes by the name Jason. He is the last remaining fool on the block who would work for the Brute.

“And what about White Junkie Boy?” He yells as I stand in the threshold at the store entrance. “I give him free beer, but he wanted more, and I could not afford him.” He continues to plead his case, as I leave the store. He used to give White Junkie Boy, money and beer for emptying the coolers, mopping the floor, and cleaning the bathrooms, but even the junkie refused to continue to work for him. He started paying him fifty dollars a week and a case of beer for a half of a day’s work, four days per week. When he cut the pay to twenty-five dollars and a six

pack, White Junkie Boy quit.

I get in my car, back out of the parking space, and push the signal switch upward to take the right turn out of the parking lot to what he calls the “*Nigger Jungle*.” I look in my rear view mirror; two black males along with a white girl with greasy hair exit a car with North Carolina tags and enter the store. They catch my attention because the girl looks odd wrapped in an oversized, winter coat in spring weather.

I proceed to exit the parking lot when I see Panther running across the four-lane street towards the store. I panic when he does not stop on the narrow median that divides the four lanes on Harrison Road, as fast moving cars were traveling in both directions. My heart races and a wide smile covers my face as he runs full speed towards me. I quickly shift the transmission to park. I get out of the car and stretch my arms wide ready to embrace him, but he runs pass me towards the path on the side of the store behind the fence the lazy Negroes in the adjacent apartments made for quicker access to the corner bus stop. Initially, I did not notice the white detective who patrols the neighborhood behind him. Detective Chandler, a black police detective popular with the neighborhood residents, runs behind them both. As I stand behind the driver’s side door, I hear a gunshot. It is so loud I use both hands to cover my ears.

The sound of children screaming over explicit rap music and panic in adult voices yelling, “*Get down! Get the children!*” interrupts the few seconds of complete silence before the second gunshot. People fire their guns in this neighborhood all of the time. I have never heard a gunshot like this. The two Black American men that entered the store with the white girl run out and fall to their knees. One removes a small handgun and crawls on the ground back to their vehicle as if he is in military combat. They get into the car and quickly drive away from the scene leaving the white girl who came with them standing alone in the parking lot.

My heart drops. My stomach begins to turn. Why are the police chasing Panther? Police

stings are customary during this time of year. The police come to Central Drive when they need to meet quotas or need to fund their coiffeurs. They set up road blocks under the guise of checking identification and insurance but the true motive is to arrest young black people, force them to pay bond fees, and ticket fines. In the last year or so, white people have been caught up in the stings, as the drug dealers who call Central Drive home are major suppliers to the new opiate market. Every once in a while, I see classmates from high school park their fancy European cars in front of the store and wait for the drug dealers to deliver their product. It usually starts the beginning of spring with road blocks in obscure places or undercover sting operations that target young drug dealers with small quantities of drugs on their persons.

Blue, spinning lights on top of late model police cruisers make me dizzy as they speed down Central Drive and turn into our parking lot. The Brute stands proud greeting the officers as they exit their cars. He is so cheap he does not like to give plastic bags to paying customers, but offers the police officers free water, soft drinks, and snacks from the store.